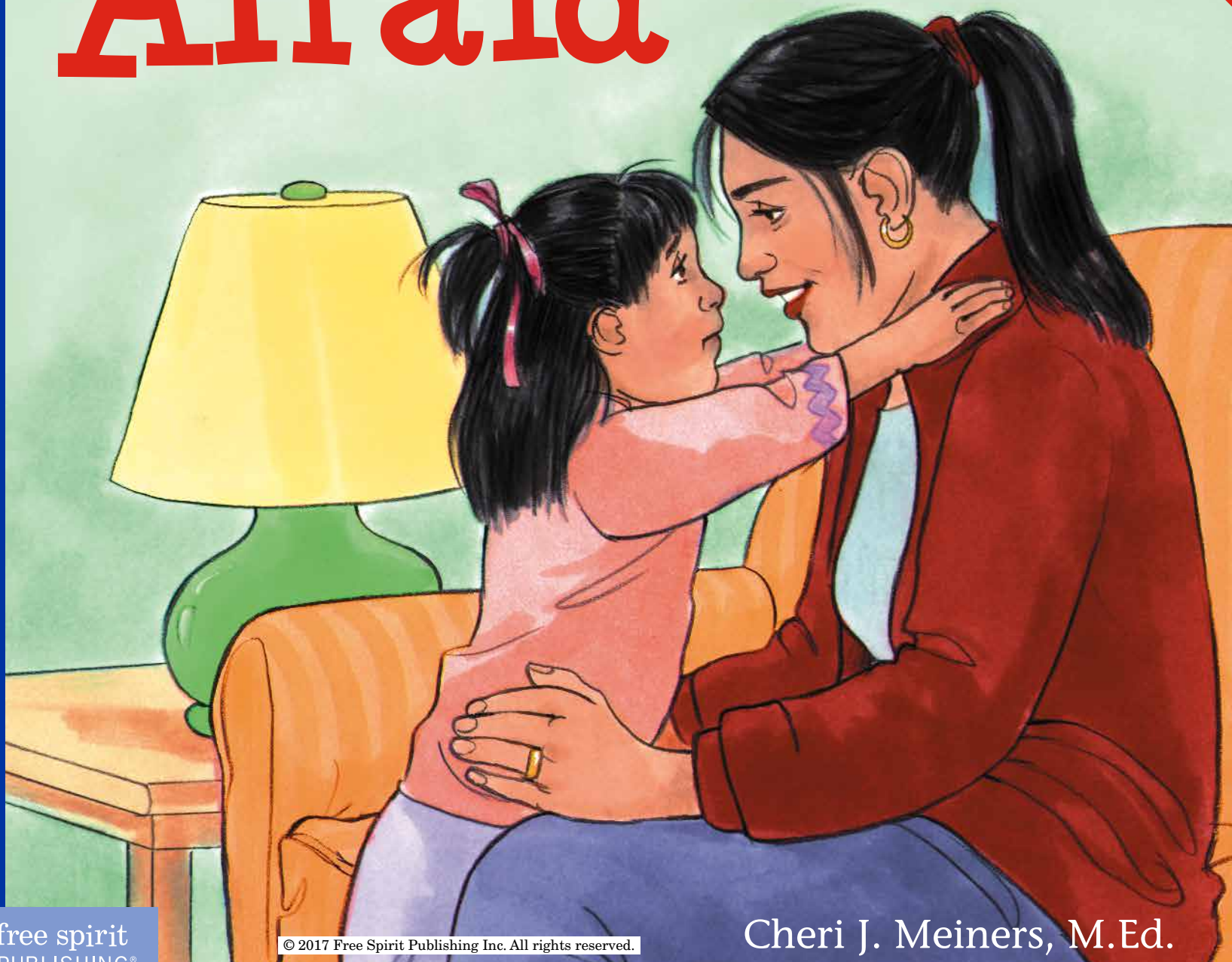


When I Feel Afraid

Includes Activity
Guide for Adults!



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Sometimes I think about things
that could happen.



I might imagine things that frighten me,



like something in the dark
or in my dreams.



Supporting Children When They Feel Afraid

Young children may fear the dark, thunder, spiders, monsters. They may become scared after seeing characters, creatures, or events on TV. They may be afraid of disasters like earthquakes, wildfires, or floods, or of violence they have experienced, seen, or heard of. *When I Feel Afraid* is meant to be a tool parents, teachers, and other adults can use to reassure young children and give them a realistic sense of control concerning their fears. Through sharing the book with adults in their lives, children can come to know that fear is a natural human response, that there are ways to cope with fears, and that there are people who can help them do this.

You may also find the following suggestions helpful. Like the ideas presented in the children's text, these emphasize three key concepts for supporting children—*communicate*, *clarify*, and *comfort*—along with activities that can help to both soothe and empower children.

Listen and ask questions. Children feel validated when they know someone cares about their fears. By listening carefully and not minimizing their concerns, you show children they can trust you to respect their sensitive feelings. When a child shows or expresses fear, ask questions to invite discussion: “What are you afraid of?” “What are you worried could happen?” “What do you know about?...” “You seem a little worried. Can you tell me about it?” Listen carefully to the child's responses. This approach helps you find out what your child already knows and what his or her specific concerns are.

Talk simply and honestly. Give answers to children according to their age, level of understanding, and interest. Avoid burdening or confusing them with too many details. At the same time, tell the truth with as much kindness as possible. Do not promise outcomes that you can't control; rather, let children know that you and others are doing everything possible to help keep them and their loved ones safe: “I know you're afraid a tornado might come. No one knows exactly where a tornado might go. We can all stay safe in the basement, though.” “It's true that being a police officer can be dangerous sometimes. Daddy gets special training, and he does lots of things to stay safe. So I don't worry about him when he's at work.”

Use a quiet, calm voice. If a child asks you about your feelings, be gentle and careful as you express your concerns, and as positive as you realistically can: “It's very scary when people get killed. The fighting is far away, though, and we're safe here at school.” Children will take their cues from you. If you speak loudly or sound panicky, children will pick up on your intensity. If your voice is steady and you seem composed, children will feel reassured. If you express a hopeful outlook or suggest a way to help, children will see that it's possible to take positive action when bad things happen: “I'm sorry the children's mommy died, too. Our family is safe here at home, though. There's a bank that's collecting money for the children. Maybe we could give some money to help.”

Remember, too, that children often tune in to grown-ups' conversations. Whenever possible, discuss adult topics out of children's hearing range.

Clear up confusions. While adults distinguish past events from current ones and the real from the imaginary, children often do not. This is especially true with television. Straighten out facts that have been misunderstood, such as confusing a TV news report with a fictional program. For fears that stem from imagination or confusion, help your child imagine a more positive outcome: “Monsters seem real on TV, but they're make-believe. Let's make up our own monster and draw a picture of it. Maybe it could be a silly one.”

Put fears in perspective. Let children know if they are not in danger, or if you consider the danger minimal. If there is a real threat to their safety, answer questions in the most reassuring way that acknowledges both the fear and your efforts to keep children safe: “Car accidents happen sometimes. But I don't think we'll die in a car crash. I drive carefully, and we all wear our seatbelts. Being careful like this helps us be safe.”

Sometimes a child will imagine that she or he caused a divorce, an accident, or someone's illness. In these situations, assure children they are not the cause of the bad things happening. Also, allay their fears about what else is likely to happen: “I'm not divorcing you; you'll still be in my life.”

Read and discuss books that deal with fears. Besides reassuring a child of your caring and concern, books offer a tool to frame a discussion of specific or general fears. They can also help you direct children toward activities that will lift their spirits.

Help children focus on the positive. Children are often more sensitive to events than adults are. While fear can help keep a child safe, it may also show caring and a concern for what happens to oneself or others. Encourage children to use this sensitivity to think of things to do for others; this will bring comfort as children focus on things over which they have control: “I know you're worried that your teacher is sick. I bet he'd be glad to know you're thinking about him. Would you like to draw a get-well picture to send him?”

Also help children see and appreciate what's good in their own lives. One way to do this is by having children make an “I Am Grateful” book. They can make individual books about things they're thankful for, or make a family or class book with pages for each person. When a child feels afraid, share the book as a reminder that the good in life can outweigh the bad.

Be available. Children can become afraid at any time, even while doing something seemingly unrelated to the fear. They may fear something they anticipate happening, something that is happening currently or is being imagined, or something frightening that they remember. At times like these, your mere presence, along with the knowledge that you are available, can be comforting to children.

Tell children that you care about them. More than anything else, children want to know that they are loved and that adults will protect them. Your relationship with them is the most powerful tool they have to help them feel secure. At home, children need to hear, “I love you.” Away from home, they need caregivers and teachers to say, “I care what happens to you.” Children need all the adults who are responsible for their well-being to tell them, “I'll take care of you.” Physical comfort is important, too. Hugs, kisses, pats on the back, shoulder rubs, and even mild rough-and-tumble play reassure children of your affection and concern.

Let children know they are never alone. Children have a fear of being separated from loved ones in a time of crisis, and at other times, too. Assure them that you are leaving them in good hands; let them know when you'll return. Make certain children know who is responsible for their care at a given time—a parent, teacher, childcare provider, or baby-sitter, for example. Also explain the role of various community helpers who are there to keep people safe. Ask children where they might turn for help at the store, at school, or in another child's home. Discuss their ideas, making sure they know how to get help in different settings. Role playing about helpers can support this message.

Keep the lines of communication open between home and school. Parents can alert teachers and caregivers to situations that might affect a child's learning or school interactions. Teachers can let parents know about school experiences so that these can be appropriately discussed and reinforced at home.